



Tears Flow like a River: Rethinking the experience of grief

By Thom Dennis, D. Min., LCPC, CT

Contrary to popular belief, grief is not a process. It does not progress through an organized set of stages to a clearly identified end. Instead, the experience of grief is more like a river: dynamic, often turbulent and constantly changing.

It requires that the mourner learn new skills and occasionally seek out more experienced guides in order to negotiate the way through some of the most troubled waters of life.

Borrowing from the different phases of a river, (Headwaters, Rapids, Run and Delta) the *GriefRiver*® model of grief uses the language of metaphor to describe the lifelong impact of loss. It offers new insights and creative suggestions to help those who mourn the death of a loved one integrate the experience of grief.

Unlike clinical language that requires specialized training to understand the concepts that are proposed, metaphorical language is the language of poetry. It engages the imagination and allows individuals the opportunity to define their own experience as they struggle to make sense of the loss.

Grief is more than the sad and angry emotions someone feels immediately after a loved one dies; it involves a complex set of reactions that extend for an unspecified length of time. According to this model, grief is defined as all of the emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations

associated with the death of a loved one, over the course of a lifetime. As many people believe that death is not the end of the journey, this model also provides us with an opportunity to engage in a conversation about the possibility of an afterlife.

Headwaters

Multiple origins of grief

Exactly where or when a river begins is not always clear. The same can also be said for grief. A river may originate from a lake or marsh, snow and ice melt from a mountain glacier, or an underground aquifer bubbling to the surface. Over the course of many miles, the volume of a river is built from rain-swelled creeks and streams, run off from fields and other smaller tributary rivers. In terms of grief, many seemingly unrelated and pre-existing issues will contribute to the volume and intensity of the grief experience. Some of these issues are more immediate, but others reach all the way back to childhood. For example, consider your earliest experiences of death or loss. Maybe you found a dead bird by the side of the road or a beloved pet died and you buried it in the back yard. Perhaps a neighbor or relative died when you were young and you attended your first funeral. These early experiences accumulated and formed the basis for understanding later losses.

A person's religion and spiritual beliefs, their culture and ethnicity will not only inform their understanding about life, death and an afterlife, but also define what are socially accepted mourning behaviors and provide a structure for emotional expression. The person's psychological make-up, their temperament, coping skills and mental health history may also create additional challenges. Addictions and dependencies will have an impact on the grieving person's ability to process their thoughts and emotions about death. Certainly the

character or length of the relationship with the person who died will factor in. Not surprisingly, when the relationship was particularly close, the grieving person usually has a harder time adjusting to the loss. However, it is also often true that when the relationship was conflicted, the mourner struggles because of unresolved relationship issues. Local tragedies, street violence, the death of celebrities, and national disasters such as 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina will impact people in different ways. Collectively they help us all form a perspective on the value of human life.

The headwaters, sometimes referred to as *historical antecedents*, form the basis from which a person understands and comes to terms with the death of a loved one.

The headwaters include *anticipatory grief*, which is defined as the grief reactions that occur when a loved one faces an impending death. How close to the time of death would the reaction need to be in order to be considered anticipatory grief? I suggest that even the first awareness that a loved one will not be around forever, however fleeting, should also be considered true grief. Every subsequent illness, every unspoken worry, every tear shed over the anticipated death of a loved one helps to prepare the person for riding the rapids that are yet to come.

Rapids

Negotiating the ever changing currents of grief

Thrill seekers unexplainably enjoy whitewater rafting and kayaking. However, the majority of the population is perfectly content to keep their feet on stable dry land. Imagine for a moment what it feels like to ride the rapids. Your heart races as your boat is tossed about by the waves. At times you may feel disoriented, wondering which way is up. Everything seems out of your control and you struggle to just stay afloat. Perhaps all you can do is send a desperate prayer to the heavens and hang on for dear life.

The more experience you have with riding whitewater, the more skilled you become. With a little direction and practice, you can successfully negotiate the current.

You learn to anticipate certain types of obstacles and navigate around them. Over time, you develop skills to make the ride more manageable and you successfully navigate your way to calmer, more peaceful waters.

The experience of loss is marked by rapid and intense shifts in emotions. One moment you are fine, the next moment you may be crying uncontrollably. Something triggers a memory and you are emotionally spent for the rest of the day. People commonly refer to these types of experiences as “waves” of grief. Similar to riding the rapids, grief is accompanied by (1) physical symptoms (2) psychological distress and disorientation and

(3) Spiritual upset. People who grieve report:

- headaches, heart aches, dizziness.
- They cannot remember where they parked the car or left their keys.
- They also commonly become angry at God or question their belief system.

It is a mistake to conclude that emotions like anger and depression are *stages of grief*. People who grieve experience a full range of emotions. While it may be true that certain emotions may be dominant at one time or another, when examined closely, these emotions are interspersed with a scattering of other emotions.

Throughout life, there may be many sets of rapids, large and small. Triggered by a memory or subsequent losses, these later sets of rapids should be expected. The challenge for all of us is to find the resources and coping skills necessary to negotiate our way through the troubled waters of life.

River travelers need certain types of equipment to negotiate the current. They need some type of conveyance, a canoe or a kayak. They need a paddle for steering, balance, and to propel them downstream. It is risky to shoot the rapids without a helmet and life preserver. People who grieve will need similar tools to move through the rapids of grief.

Whitewater is graded on a scale between one to six, six being dangerous for even the most experienced kayakers. Support

group members can be encouraged to adopt a similar grading system to describe how they are doing at the beginning of each weekly session. Although every person's experience is unique, the grading system gives everyone in attendance a pretty clear sense of how other members are doing on their individual journeys.

Run

Learning to go with the flow

At a certain point, the landscape evens out and the river begins to meander like a ribbon draped across the living room floor. During the run phase of a river, the waters typically run swift and deep. With most of the rapids behind them, the grieving person is able to refocus on the scenery and the events of everyday life, although there will still be other sets of rapids. Typically around birthdays, anniversaries, and the holidays, one can expect more turbulence. Unexpected triggers like the smell of perfume, a favorite sweater, or a simple memory will also have a rippling effect. For the most part, people are able to continue on the journey of life without too much difficulty. Between the rapids, runs may extend for long periods of time with very little conscious grief work occurring. However, thoughts of the deceased often remain just beneath the surface. Even twenty years later, one widower reports that he still thinks of his wife every day. Instead of this admission indicating unresolved or pathological grief, it can be considered a testament to their enduring bond of love. One member of a support group

commented, "I don't think we ever stop grieving, I think we just get better at it."

As months and years go by, survivors learn to go with the flow and adjust to the currents of life without the deceased as their captain or rowing partner. Every year and every major life event serve as a mile marker, for evaluating how they are doing without their beloved companion. There is no timeline for grief. Every person grieves at their own pace and in their own way. Every person's experience of the river will be unique. **The challenge for those who mourn is not to learn how to "let go." The challenge is to find ways to stay connected as time passes and memories fade.**

The rush to move through grief as quickly as possible is understandable. The death of a loved one is one of the most stressful events in life. It hurts to lose someone close to you. However, it would be a mistake to declare grief over after only thirty days, six months, or a year.

Delta

A time for reflection and integration

The final phase of a river is the part that precedes the river's mouth. In some cases, the river spreads out, forming an estuary or marsh. The pace slows down dramatically. When conditions are right, sediment deposits form fan-shaped land masses, interlaced by channels and canals called deltas. Water that is not allowed to flow freely becomes stagnant.

On the journey of life, this final phase is a time for reflection and integration. We are given an opportunity to engage in "life review" and try to make sense of our lives. I think we have all had the opportunity to meet someone in their twilight years who was filled with bitterness and regret.

Perhaps we have also met a kind old wisdom figure who blesses us with the gift of insights they have gained over the years. Our common hope is that we will eventually all come to a place of acceptance about the choices we have made in our own lives.

Illness can also invite us to do this kind of reflection. As we engage in the process of life review, we look over all of the major events in our lives, including decisions we have made and we evaluate them. We examine our mistakes, missed opportunities, and hopefully come to a place of peace about them.

If we have not done so already, we are challenged to develop a point of view about death, particularly one's own.

Our personal health concerns provide an opportunity to confront unaddressed grief issues.

Having seen how loved ones suffered during their final illness, we may choose options like pre-planned funeral arrangements, advanced directives, or hospice.

While in the delta phase of life, we can look for answers to all those deeper questions. Spiritual beliefs about what happens after we die may bubble to the surface. All of our previous experiences of the death of loved ones, and the increasing regularity of the death of our friends and age mates will

be the material out of which we form our final perspective.

Rejoining the Sea

What's next?

It is said that all rivers eventually lead to the sea. Could we also say the same thing about the grief river? Depending on your perspective, Heaven or Hell, reincarnation, conversion to cosmic energy or nothingness, death is either the end of the journey or the beginning of a whole new adventure.

So many people believe that death is not the end of the journey. It would be a mistake to enter into a discussion about grief, loss and death without considering the possibility of some kind of afterlife.

Is it possible that there is a piece of us that lives on after the body ceases to function? Is there a consciousness that transcends the confines of time and space?

Does the way we live our lives now effect what will come later? Can we communicate with those who have moved beyond our horizons?

Existential questions like these have been asked for millennia and go to the heart of the human experience. While the answers may be elusive, it is important to struggle with the questions. Fortunately, there is no shortage of religious and philosophical systems offering plausible responses.

Views from the River

Extending the metaphor

While each of the phases of a river offers helpful description for the different aspects of grief, the metaphor of the river also allows us

to acknowledge the continuity of experience. Life is not a set of stop and start stages; instead, it is a collection of interconnected moments, each requiring constant vigilance, adaptation and perseverance.

If grief lasts a lifetime, the goal shifts from trying to find a way to resolve our grief to finding the resources, coping skills and support necessary to deal with the moment at hand.

What will you need for the trip? Experienced river guides offer novices a list of equipment that can either be purchased or rented for a reasonable fee: a raft or kayak, paddles, life jacket and helmet. You will need food for the journey and sandbars to rest along the way.

Those who mourn will need a similar type of resource list in order to negotiate the ever-changing currents of grief.

To navigate your way through the phases of grief, it is recommended that you call upon all existing sources of support as well as find new companions for the journey. Supporters come in many forms including: friends, family, a grief support group or counselor, members of your social organizations or faith community groups, coworkers, even pets. It is particularly helpful to cultivate relationships with other people who have experienced similar types of loss.

Given that every relationship is different and the landscape of life is constantly changing, every experience of loss will be uncharted waters. There will be hazards to watch out for and beauty to discover along the way. For the

observant, this journey not only involves sadness and heartache; the experience of grief offers many gifts and can teach new lessons to guide them for the rest of their lives. Seasoned travelers often report that they have a new found sense of gratitude and compassion for others. After a loved one dies, people also report that they have discovered untapped internal resources and have developed a new set of survival skills.

As months and years go by, the death anniversary provides an opportunity for evaluating distances traveled. Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, and other life events not only serve as reminders of the loss, but provide an opportunity to reflect on one's resiliency and ability to cope.

The river model of grief is flexible enough to allow anyone with a little imagination to adapt it for their own use. Once the river metaphor is introduced, people often create new metaphors to describe their own experience. Consider what meaning you would assign to each of the following words and phrases; undertow, adrift, sink or swim, struggling to keep my head above water, when the levee breaks and up a creek without a paddle.

The use of the river metaphor can help make the experience of loss much less intimidating and much more manageable. It provides a simple and non-judgmental way to evaluate the experience of loss and to teach the skills necessary to move through it with a greater degree of agility.